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At an Impasse

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**At an impasse?
Anti-capitalism and the social forums today
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The international movement against capitalist globalisation has been globally visible for nearly a decade now. It started with the Chiapas rising of January 1994 and the French public sector strikes of November–December 1995, and exploded onto the global stage at the Seattle protests in November 1999. It then enjoyed a period of dynamic expansion through the launch of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001, the massive confrontation at the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001, and the first European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. The culmination was the enormous demonstrations against the war in Iraq between February and April 2003. Subsequently, however, there has not been the same forward impetus. Indeed, increasingly centrifugal pressures and even a degree of disarray have become evident. [1]

The seventh World Social Forum, held in Nairobi, Kenya, in January 2007, may have marked a turning point. The forum was far from being a disaster, despite the questionable decision to hold it in a country with weak social movements. Some 46,000 people participated, the majority from Kenya itself and around a

quarter from the rest of Africa – no mean achievement, given the poverty and vast distances of the continent. The coming together of activists involved movements from across Africa and the rest of the Global South, as well as from the North, generated some of the energy on display at the earlier world and European forums. And the opening and closing marches, from the slum settlements of Kibera and Kariobongi respectively, did offer a vivid sense of the convergence of global struggles, even if they were relatively small.

Nevertheless, the forum was also crippled by internal controversy. Many local and foreign activists expressed the view, summarised by one of the organisers, Onyango Oloo, national coordinator of the Kenya Social Forum, that “the event gave rise to disturbing and negative tendencies such as commercialisation, militarisation and authoritarian and undemocratic decision-making”. [2] Particular anger was caused by the sponsorship of the forum by a mobile phone company, the high entrance fees charged to Kenyan participants, the dominance of catering by elite local hospitality firms such as the Windsor and Norfolk, and the pervasive presence of the police and military. The tensions climaxed when a coalition of Kenyan slum-dwellers and foreign activists led by Trevor Ngwane of the South African Anti-Privatisation Forum stormed the Windsor restaurant, owned by John Michuki, minister of internal security (and known by Kenyans as Kimendeero, the crusher, because of his role for the British colonial regime during the 1950s Mau Mau rebellion), and redistributed its contents. Oloo paints a damning insider’s portrait of the undemocratic way in which the forum was run. He tells of “a political evaluation of the WSF” by “perhaps the most high profile member of the organising committee” which refers to “glue-sucking urchins from Korogocho” (a slum in northern Nairobi), while dismissing most of the critics of the process as “condescending Trotskyites from the North”. [3] The Filipino intellectual and activist Walden Bello, one of the movement’s

most consistent strategic thinkers, writes, “There was a strong sense of going backward rather than forward in Nairobi.” [4]

Italian trade unionist Bruno Ciccaglione criticises what he calls “the tendencies ... to transform the WSF into a folklorist/commercial event”, but argues that these are only symptoms. “The real problem” is the divergence in what is happening to the different movements that were the driving force in the WSF process:

On the one side the European movements, able to produce large mobilisations and concrete victories in past years, are today in a deep crisis and do not look capable to have unitary and common mobilisations at a continental level, and, sometimes, like Italy, even at a national level. On the other side the Latin American movements, very strong at the moment, are living an interesting and successful period ... but they are a lot more concentrated on their own continent rather than on a worldwide perspective. [5]

This loss of impetus can be traced in the trajectory of the most powerful anti-capitalist organisation in Europe, Attac France. Founded in 1998 to campaign for the regulation of financial speculation, it initially grew explosively, attaining a membership of 30,000 by 2001, and spawning affiliates in many other countries. However, Attac’s membership stagnated in 2002–4 and then started to decline, falling to 21,000 in 2006. This reflected an increasingly bitter internal crisis that drove Attac to the verge of a split by the end of last year. [6]

There are in fact a number of issues that we need to analyse to begin to understand this sense of crisis in the European movement. There are inherent difficulties with common mobilisations, there are weaknesses in the methods and practices of the social forum movement, and there are political problems that have emerged in the process of developing the wider movements. This article aims to help develop this understanding. Its focus is largely on Europe because this is the region that we know best and it is here that the crisis in the anti-capitalist

movement is most visible.

The dialectic of national and global

Global capitalism is subject to what Leon Trotsky called the law of uneven and combined development. So too are the movements that resist it. The anti-capitalist movement developed certain key national bases during its initial phase of dynamic expansion. The Al Qaida attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 crippled the North American coalition of activists that had been responsible for the Seattle protests and had expanded rapidly thereafter. Fortunately, an axis had already developed through the first WSF in Porto Alegre between Attac in France and a coalition of Brazilian NGOs and social movements (notably the MST landless labourers' movement and the CUT trade union federation), which gave the movement a stable global framework. A powerful third partner came from the explosive development of the social forum movement in Italy, under the inspiration of the WSF and hugely accelerated by the confrontation at the Genoa G8 summit in July 2001. [7] Others played an important role – for instance the Indian organisers of the most successful WSF to date, in Mumbai in January 2004 – but the most politically important relationships were between these three partners.

Relations within the Franco-Italian-Brazilian trinity were never exactly harmonious. Neither Attac nor its partners in the Brazilian based WSF organising committee were happy about the high profile involvement of the *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (the Refounded Communist Party) in the Italian movement. Bernard Cassen, first president of Attac, was openly critical of the emphasis on the war at the first European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. [8] That emphasis also drew the Italians closer in 2001–3 to the emerging anti-war movement in Britain – the object of much mistrust from both

Attac and various autonomists because of the role of the radical left in its leadership. Nevertheless, these tensions were relatively easy to manage till after Florence and the anti-war protests of early 2003.

Greater internal polarisation became visible in 2003–4, reaching a crescendo at the third European Social Forum in London in October 2004. In part it involved a natural process of political differentiation. As the movement developed, it confronted increasingly demanding questions about how to pursue the struggle both against neoliberalism and against the imperialist offensive mounted by the United States and its allies. The diverging responses led to the crystallisation of distinct political tendencies within the movement – a reformist right wing, focused on Attac and its international network, seeking a return to a more regulated capitalism; autonomists who claimed to be transcending traditional debates on the left and building localised alternatives to capitalism in the here and now; and a radical left seeking to get rid of capitalism altogether. Such a clash of different political perspectives was inevitable, though debate was often obfuscated by the tendency of the right wing to use autonomist language and even (as at the London European Social Forum) to ally with the autonomists against the left. [9]

But the subsequent evolution of the movement has shown it has other problems. A key characteristic of the anti-capitalist movement has been its transnational character (hence it was always a misnomer to call it the “anti-globalisation movement”, since it has from its inception been the most international of movements: for those reluctant to apply the label “anti-capitalist”, “the movement for another globalisation” and “*altermondialiste* movement” are much better alternatives). But this poses the problem of how it pursues a genuinely transnational struggle. International mobilisations against G8 summits and World Trade Organisation meetings are one answer, but these are intermittent and artificial events, and are too vulnerable to the contingencies of location (which tend,

precisely because of the protests, to be ever more remote) to be the basis for a sustained movement.

Opposition to the war in Iraq offered a genuinely universal unifying issue. No wonder, then, that 15 February 2003 represents a historic peak of global mass protest. But the bulk of the movement did not persist with anti-war mobilisation once Baghdad had fallen on 9 April 2003. There were a variety of reasons for this. As we have seen, one very influential actor, Attac, regarded the war as a diversion from the real priority of opposing neoliberal globalisation. Moreover, in much of continental Europe the peace movements also gave up serious anti-war campaigning. This reflected their origins as pacifist groupings campaigning against nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Ideologically and temperamentally they were ill-equipped to respond to a conflict pitting American imperialism against enemies it portrayed as “Islamofascist”, and so threw in the towel with some relief.

In the US itself the luxury of not talking about the war wasn't available, and the US anti-war movement has mobilised on a very impressive scale. A series of historic demonstrations and the stand of anti-war troops and their families have helped to turn US opinion overwhelmingly against the war, a feat many had felt was impossible. But from the start the anti-war movement was divided. There was Answer, led by pro-North Korean Stalinists who have subsequently themselves split, and there was the much broader and more mainstream United for Peace and Justice. Many of this organisation's leaders and supporters allowed themselves to be diverted into John Kerry's presidential campaign in 2004, in the vain hope that even a pro-war Democrat would be better than George Bush. The distraction was doubly damaging because of the demoralisation caused by Kerry's defeat. It is only in the past year or so that the American anti-war movement has begun to recover from these setbacks.

There were, of course, exceptions to the pattern of dropping the issue of the war once it had started. The Spanish anti-war movement, though never well coordinated at a national level, played an important role in turning the tragedy of the Madrid train bombings into a rout for the warmongering Aznar government in March 2004. The movements in Turkey and Greece have continued to make an impact on their national political scene. But the most important exception has been the Stop the War Coalition in Britain, a new kind of anti-war movement founded specifically to oppose the “war on terrorism”, whose radical left leadership has been able to sustain a broad coalition with considerable popular support and mobilising power.

At an international level, Focus on the Global South, whose roots lie in the 1990s campaigns against trade and debt from which the anti_capitalist movement emerged, has shown a very clear understanding of the connections between neoliberalism and imperialism and has devoted considerable effort to maintaining a global anti-war network. The annual Cairo Conference has built powerful links between the opposition in the most important Arab state and some Northern anti-war coalitions. But, important though these different initiatives are, and despite the fact that there is deep seated popular opposition everywhere to Bush’s “long war”, the fact remains that there is currently no real *global* movement against the war.

No other issue has emerged to replace the war as a transnational mobilising focus. The idea was floated at a meeting in Genoa in July 2003 of building “a social 15 February”. It was a wonderful idea, but, in the circumstances, utopian. Everyone, wherever they were, could campaign against the war in Iraq. But neoliberal attacks necessarily unfold on a national terrain. Even when they reflect global or (within the European Union) continental initiatives by capital, the timing and content of their implementation are shaped by the nation-state concerned. Taking

up what in the European movement has come to be called “the social question” therefore has a centrifugal logic.

Now in many ways this is a welcome development. The old establishment taunt at the anti-capitalist movement was that it was an elitist travelling circus. But the movement has in fact sunk real, national roots in some parts of the world. In Europe this has happened in a number of countries, notably France, Italy, Germany, Greece and Britain. But this has produced diverging political priorities in different countries.

For example, there has been a long-running debate between the movements in France and Britain over the relative priority of the war and “the social question”. In part, this reflects real political disagreements arising from different appreciations of the relationship between neoliberalism and imperialism. [10]

At the same time, the different socio-political realities of the two countries mean that the issues differ in their mobilising power. France is the European country that has witnessed the most sustained resistance to neoliberalism, with social explosions in 1995, 2003, 2005, and 2006. In Britain, perhaps because neoliberalism was imposed here first and most comprehensively under the Thatcher government in the 1980s, there is a degree of popular fatalism about the possibility of stopping or reversing the inroads of the market that has, for example, made it difficult to mount effective mass agitation against the Bolkestein Directive aimed at privatising public services in the European Union. The war in Iraq has, by contrast, generated enormous popular anger that continues to bring large demonstrations onto the streets.

These difficulties have not made cross-border mobilisations against neoliberalism impossible. On the contrary, respectable *altermondialiste* contingents took part in protests in Brussels in March 2005 and Strasbourg in February 2006. But the reach of these mobilisations was limited to north western Europe and participants numbered in thousands, not tens or hundreds of

thousands. This pattern will no doubt change with the further development of social resistance to neoliberalism – Britain included, since increasing pressure on living standards may lead to a revival in workers’ struggles here – but this future prospect doesn’t alter the present limitations of the movement.

The troubled return of politics

Greater engagement by the movements with their national realities has a further complicating effect. The more anti-capitalist coalitions find themselves operating in a national arena, the harder it is to evade the political field. But one of the founding myths of the movement is its separation from political parties, reflected in the famous ban on their participation in social forums in the WSF Charter of Principles. This was a symptom of what Daniel Bensaïd has aptly called:

A “social illusion” ... an illusion in the self-sufficiency of social movements reflected in the experiences after Seattle (1999) and the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (2001). Simplifying somewhat, I call this the “utopian moment” of social movements, which took different forms: utopias based on the regulation of free markets; Keynesian utopias; and above all neo-libertarian utopias, in which the world can be changed without taking power or making do with counter-powers (John Holloway, Toni Negri, Richard Day). [\[11\]](#)

The ideology of autonomous social movements developed during the 1970s and 1980s, as the left and the organised working class suffered serious defeats. It is therefore not surprising that it should be a major influence on activists mobilising against neoliberalism. Many of them were veterans of these defeats. They are often based in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that, by virtue of their social role, have a complex relationship of both distance from and dependence on official politics, or, as in France and Italy, they are based in the

broad activist coalitions through which the *altermondialiste* movement began to develop in the course of the 1990s. [12] As time has gone on, this ideology has become a growing obstacle to the further development of the movement.

This can be seen in all three countries of the dominant trinity. In Brazil the ban on parties in the Porto Alegre charter was hypocrisy from the start. The WSF depended on a tacit understanding between its founders and the Workers' Party, which was, at the time of the WSF launch, in opposition at the federal level but in control of the city of Porto Alegre and the state of Rio Grande do Sul of which it is the capital. The election of Workers' Party leader Lula as president in October 2002 posed an acute problem for the movement both locally and internationally, since he stuck to the neoliberal economic policies of his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

The increasing integration of the Workers' Party leadership in Brazilian capitalism caused revulsion among many activists and intellectuals previously loyal to the party. [13] The Porto Alegre WSF in January 2005 was marked by a visible polarisation, with Lula addressing the forum at its start and Hugo Chávez speaking to a huge rally of the young at its end. That put the Porto Alegre charter on life support and dramatised the choice facing the left in Latin America between a regional version of Blairism and the search for 21st century socialism.

In France the pressure of the political field has been both more complex and more demanding. Probably the most important single impact that the anti-capitalist movement has had in a national arena was the role *altermondialistes* played in the campaign that defeated the neoliberal European Constitutional Treaty in the French referendum of 29 May 2005. Considerable credit must go to the leadership of Attac for identifying the issue of the constitution as a major challenge to the movement. But a decisive role in that movement was played by the traditional political organisations of the left, despite the contribution of Attac and other *altermondialiste* groups.

The French Socialist Party split as its rank and file rebelled against its leadership – a development that was matched in the CGT, the biggest trade union federation. A leading role within the national network of 29 May collectives was played by the Socialist Party left (and not so left) alongside the Communist Party and the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR). This was, as Stathis Kouvelakis put it, “the triumph of the political”: “The real significance of the referendum process was the popular mobilisation which took hold of political questions on a scale not seen since the early 1970s”. [14]

Building on this victory has, alas, proved very difficult. A strong will developed after the referendum to continue the coalition that had delivered the No vote and to give it a political expression by running a unitary anti-neoliberal candidate in the presidential elections of April-May 2007. This was, however, sabotaged by the two most important political organisations of the radical left, though they did so by pursuing opposed strategies. The Communist Party sought to embrace and indeed in many cases take over the 29 May collectives in order to gain their support for the candidacy of the party’s general secretary, Marie-George Buffet. The LCR, by contrast, kept aloof and concentrated on preparing the presidential campaign of its candidate, Olivier Besancenot, a stance it justified on the grounds that the collectives had failed to rule out in principle participating in a social-liberal coalition government headed by the Socialist Party.

The result was chaos, rancour and division in the collectives. Instead of a unitary anti-neoliberal candidate running in the first round of the presidential elections on 22 April, the political fragmentation on the radical left actually increased compared to the first round five years before, with José Bové running as the candidate of the rump of the collectives against Buffet, Besancenot and two other Trotskyist candidates. The cohesion of the organised left has also been weakened, with powerful

minorities in both the Communist Party and the LCR opposed to their parties' official positions.

The behaviour of the political organisations has increased hostility to parties and thereby strengthened the ideology of autonomous social movements. Besancenot's success in coming fifth in the first round with over 4 percent of the vote, well ahead of Buffet and Bové, salvaged something from this debacle, but it places a heavy responsibility on the LCR to take the initiative in building a genuinely united radical left.

The crisis of the French radical left also affected Attac. The replacement in 2002 of Cassen as president of Attac France by his chosen heir Jacques Nikonoff marked the beginning of an increasingly bitter faction fight. It pitted the two of them against a loose left that saw Attac as an important ingredient in a broader coalition of social movements rather than, as Susan George (sponsor of the opposition slate for the Attac leadership) put it, "a hierarchical, top-down pyramidal organisation with a strong executive, able to give orders to its troops and eventually to serve their private political ambitions on the French left". [15]

Cassen and Nikonoff made an abortive attempt to run an *altermondialiste* list in the European parliamentary elections in May 2004 and sought unsuccessfully to keep Attac local committees out of the collectives formed to oppose the European Constitution a year later. But, as Raphaël Wintrebert has documented in his important study of Attac, the shockingly autocratic methods used by Cassen and particularly by Nikonoff were an important factor in the developing polarisation. After the referendum victory Attac imploded into a fierce internal struggle that became worse after the National Administrative Council elections held in June 2006 were denounced by the defeated left opposition on grounds of fraud (their claims were upheld by two internal inquiries). The opposition won the restaged elections the following December but Cassen and Nikonoff showed their intention to continue the struggle by forming their own network, *Avenir d'Attac*. [16]

It was in Italy that the troubling question of the political representation of the social movements has had the most disastrous consequences. Fausto Bertinotti, general secretary of Rifondazione, closely identified his party with the social forums during their heady expansion between Genoa and Florence. He brilliantly used the abstract and ambiguous vocabulary of autonomism to give the impression that Rifondazione fully identified with the most radical ambitions of the anti-capitalist movement, without committing himself to anything very definite. But, as the social forums lost impetus, Bertinotti turned back towards mainstream politics.

He prepared the way for the party's return to the centre-left (from which it had broken in 1998) with a campaign in 2004 committing Rifondazione to pacifism and opposition to political violence. The logical culmination of the process was Rifondazione's entry into the centre-left government formed by Romano Prodi after he narrowly won the Italian general election in April 2006. Ironically, in the light of Bertinotti's earlier pacifist professions, this led to Rifondazione voting to support Italy's participation in the Nato military mission in Afghanistan and expelling a far left senator who abstained in one parliamentary division on this issue.

The effect on the anti-war movement in Italy, hitherto the largest in Europe, was nothing short of catastrophic. Piero Bernocchi of the left union Cobas described the situation at the end of 2006:

There is now a big split in the Italian anti-war movement. A first part doesn't give to the occupation of Afghanistan the same importance as the occupation of Iraq; to avoid going against Prodi's government, it didn't want to organise anything when the government decided to maintain the troops in Afghanistan and this part is for the Italian troops in Lebanon. The second part is for withdrawal from Afghanistan but not from Lebanon. The third part, in which Cobas are, is for the end of all the Italian war missions (Afghanistan, Lebanon, Kosovo, etc.). [17]

The consequences of these divisions were visible on the streets of Rome. On the first anniversary of the invasion of Iraq in March 2004 a million people had marched in Rome. Three years later only 30,000 demonstrated. Given the central role that the Italian social forums had played for the anti-capitalist movement globally at the time of Genoa and Florence, this was a disastrous development.

If the French case showed the difficulty in gaining political representation for the social movements and of overcoming the divisions among the established left organisations, the Italian situation highlighted the dependence of movements on parties. Despite all the talk of autonomous social movements, when Bertinotti moved rightwards, he pulled the Italian movement along with him, fragmenting it in the process. Both examples illustrate, unfortunately in negative terms, that movements seeking to challenge neoliberalism and imperialism cannot escape the political field.

Fragmentation and drift

These political divisions were greatly reinforced by the increasingly dysfunctional way in which the anti-capitalist movement organises itself. From Seattle onwards the principle has prevailed that decisions are taken in assemblies open to all and on the basis of consensus. This method of decision making did have some advantages in the early phase of the movement's development. Giving everyone a veto helped to build trust in a new coalition involving actors from very different backgrounds and it bypassed the problem of deciding how to weigh the votes of different organisations, which would have been raised by a system of delegate democracy.

Nevertheless, there are very high costs to this supposedly "horizontal" form of democracy. It is subject to what was long

ago identified in the American women's movement as "the tyranny of structurelessness": in the absence of formal structure, informal elites emerge to ensure that the movement actually functions. [18] This has been very visible in the European Social Forum (ESF) process, where an alliance of the French and Italian *altermondialiste* coalitions has largely dominated decision making.

From the start, securing consensus has frequently involved backdoor bargaining to arrive at compromises; recalcitrant minorities have sometimes been bullied into not exercising their right to veto decisions; chair-people, seeking to manage difficult and often lengthy meetings, have always sought to steer discussion, sometimes in a very directive way. Moreover, the quickly established procedure of taking decisions at the European Preparatory Assembly, whose venue shifts each time from one European city to another, tended to ensure the dominance of large organisations – trade unions, NGOs, the different branches of Attac, political parties – with the resources to send delegates to these meetings.

Instead of recognition of these defects, leading to a serious attempt to improve the democratic functioning of the process, there has been a marked degeneration. In the lead-up to the London ESF, Italian and to a lesser extent French delegates persistently intervened to support the opposition of a fairly marginal grouping of autonomists to the British coalition responsible for bringing the forum to London, and acquiesced in the attempts violently to disrupt the forum and the closing rally. Subsequently, however, the situation became substantially worse.

The Athens ESF, held in May 2006, had to contend with deep political divisions. On one side was the Greek Social Forum, a coalition of far left sects sponsored by the radical left party Synaspismos and by the Franco-Italian axis, and on the other was Genoa 2001, involving the Greek Socialist Workers Party and the Greens, and linked to the Greek trade union federation.

The result of a bitterly contested preparatory process was the smallest ESF to date, where even the large concluding demonstration was marred by a row over the order of march that saw violent attacks by Greek Social Forum “stewards” on the anti-war contingent.

None of this stopped the dominant forces in the ESF process from proclaiming Athens a success. But the difficulties that they have faced in finding a viable national coalition willing to host the fifth ESF were symptomatic – it took till April 2007, nearly a year after Athens, to reach agreement that the next Forum will take place in Scandinavia in September 2008, and even then the venue – either the Danish capital, Copenhagen, or the Swedish city of Malmö – remains undecided. No wonder attendance at European Preparatory Assemblies has dwindled, as many participants have voted with their feet, leaving the Franco-Italian hard core and their hangers on to dominate. Despite the growing evidence of crisis, however, this group has, ever since the London ESF, responded by seeking organisational solutions, reflected by a growing obsession with “methodology” that has spawned yet more all-European meetings and thereby made the decision-making process even more opaque and unaccountable.

The same preoccupation with procedure was evident in the faction fight inside Attac, where the leaders of the opposition (many of them, such as Pierre Khalfa, prominent in the ESF process) made what Wintrebert calls the “important ‘strategic’ error” of arguing that “it wasn’t fundamental problems that divided the leading members [of Attac], but only a problem of the ‘style of leadership’.” This conceded the initiative to Nikonoff and Cassen, who were much more willing to introduce political issues, such as their defence of French republican “laicity” against the Muslim veil. [\[19\]](#)

The problems created by this kind of organisational overload were reinforced by the increasing influence of the conception of the social forums advanced by Cassen and another of the founders of the WSF, the Brazilian Chico Whitaker. For them,

the social forums do not belong to a movement, or even the “movements of movements”. Rather, they are “a socially horizontal space” where different actors can converge to discuss and share perspectives. [20] In particular – and this is a constant source of puzzlement to participants in social forums who are uninitiated into these mysteries – the international forums don’t take decisions. This risks alienating activists who want to be part of the movement’s decision-making process and who are often radicalised partly by the way neoliberalism has hollowed out democratic political forms at national level. It is also off-putting because it can turn the social forums into talking shops pure and simple. An interplay between discussion, decision and mobilisation is the lifeblood of any real movement.

The left within the movement has sought to bypass the problem by inventing the Assembly of the Social Movements, where different social movements get together at the end of each social forum and adopt an action plan of mobilisations. The device immediately attracted the hostility of Whitaker, Cassen and others on the right of the movement. Their response has involved celebrating “diversity” by fragmenting social forums around different “thematic priorities”. Thus the fifth WSF in Brazil in January 2005 was spread along the banks of the river Guiba in Porto Alegre with the division of the site into 11 distinct “thematic terrains”. As we wrote at the time:

Space A was devoted to autonomous thought, B to defending diversity, plurality, and identities, C to art and creation, and so on. The effect was tremendously to fragment the forum. If you were interested in a particular subject – say, culture or war or human rights – you could easily spend the entire four days in one relatively small area without coming into contact with people interested in different subjects. [21]

Even though European activists reacted negatively to that WSF, the drive to fragment the Social Forums was used to justify the absence of any unifying events at the Athens ESF. Even figures generally on the left of the movement gave way to the new cult

of diversity. Piero Bernocchi argued at an European preparatory meeting in Istanbul in September 2005 that the *altermondialiste* movement was a “rainbow coalition” that could not take decisions over priorities. But the very strength of the movement from Seattle onwards lay in the convergence of different coalitions in a common struggle against neoliberalism and war. Had the view Bernocchi expressed in Istanbul prevailed before Florence, 15 February would never have happened.

Fragmentation reached the level of caricature in Nairobi. Cramped physical conditions and organisational chaos meant that there was no repetition of the physical partition into “thematic terrains”. But the official programme concluded with “big forums of struggles and alternatives” meeting separately to discuss 21 different themes, followed by “a tree-planting event”. The left successfully insisted on ending instead with an unscheduled Assembly of the Social Movements, which at least agreed on a common schedule of future mobilisations.

But the assemblies are organised within the prevailing ideology of autonomous social movements and therefore reflect the weaknesses already discussed. As in other cases, the method of consensus decision making tends to ensure the dominance of “insiders” with resources and connections. The agenda and order of speakers are fixed in advance by meetings that, though theoretically open to all, are run by veterans and those with the greatest resources and stamina. There is very rarely any real discussion at the assemblies themselves – and never any voting. This rules out the possibility of any serious popular discussion or development of strategy. They do serve a real function and represent a sincere effort by those who organise them to give some coherence to the movement. But they don’t provide the kind of democratic decision making the movement needs.

Many activists have grown increasingly impatient with the fragmentation and drift that have come to prevail. At last year’s WSF in Bamako, Mali, Samir Amin of Egypt and François Houtart of Belgium initiated an appeal. It “aims at consolidating

the gains made” at the social forums by “defining and promoting alternatives capable of mobilising social and political forces. The goal is a radical transformation of the capitalist system”. [22]

Amin, a leading radical dependency theorist in the 1960s and 1970s, has been a key figure in pressing for a much greater strategic focus for the anti-capitalist movement:

There is no room for self-congratulation about these successes [of the movement]. They remain insufficient to shift the balance of social and political forces in favour of the popular classes, and therefore remain vulnerable to the extent that the movement has not moved from defensive resistance to the offensive ... Progress is and will be difficult. For it implies (i) the radicalisation of struggles and (ii) their convergence in diversity ... in common action plans, which imply a strategic political vision, the definition of immediate and more distant objectives (the “perspective” that defines the alternative). The radicalisation of struggles is not that of the rhetoric of their discourses, but their articulation of an alternative project with which they propose to replace the prevailing systems of social power ... convergence can only be the product of a “politicisation” (in the good sense of the word) of the fragmented movements. This necessity is resisted by the discourse of “apolitical civil society”, an ideology imported directly from the United States, which continues to exert its ravages. [23]

Amin, who goes on to criticise “the theorists of autonomist currents [who] affirm that we can change the world without taking power”, for denying the necessity of a strategic convergence of struggles, also notes that the Bamako Appeal had “irritated the WSF ‘Secretariat’.” Indeed a seminar on the appeal in Nairobi saw a fierce clash when Chico Whitaker objected strongly to Trevor Ngwane’s critical defence of the appeal and criticisms of the fragmentation and absence of strategy in the WSF. But it was clear that large numbers of activists were worried about the lack of direction of the movement. The response of the WSF international council was to issue a call for worldwide mobilisations to coincide with the big business World Economic Forum in January 2008 – a decision that both

contradicted the ideology of the social forums as simply “spaces” and implied that a summons to action from the stratosphere could somehow magically give unity and impetus to the movement.

Moving forward

It is important not to take too cataclysmic a view of the current condition of the anti-capitalist movement. Above all, the other side isn't in too good a state. The World Trade Organisation's Doha round, launched in November 2001 and intended radically to deepen global capitalism's reach into national economies and to demonstrate the unity of the world's ruling classes after 9/11, has run to a halt. True, the anti-capitalist movement can't claim the chief credit for this, which lies with the deep and persisting divisions between the United States and the European Union and the emergence of a new bloc of powerful Third World states, the Group of 20. Moreover, both Washington and Brussels are seeking to bypass the deadlock by negotiating bilateral economic partnership agreements with individual countries. Nevertheless, the disarray in the World Bank with Paul Wolfowitz's sacking symbolises the larger difficulties faced by the neoliberal camp.

The plight of the imperialist offensive launched by the Bush administration after 11 September 2001 is, of course, much more serious. US failure to impose its will on Iraq led to the administration's defeat in the mid-term elections in November 2006 and goaded Bush into ordering a military “surge” that shows no signs of succeeding. America and its Nato allies are mired in a long-term guerrilla war in Afghanistan that may prove equally intractable. There is a crisis of legitimacy for US global hegemony that will limit Washington's ability to exercise “soft” ideological power as well.

A poll of 26,000 people in 25 countries for the BBC World Service in January 2007 revealed that 73 percent disapproved of the Iraq War, while “majorities across the 25 countries also disapprove of US handling of Guantanamo detainees (67 percent), the Israeli-Hezbollah war (65 percent), Iran’s nuclear programme (60 percent), global warming (56 percent), and North Korea’s nuclear programme (54 percent)”. 49 percent of those polled said that the US is playing a mainly negative role in the world. [24] This erosion of America’s global standing has real effects. Commenting on US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice’s shift towards a more compromising position on issues such as North Korean nukes, the **Financial Times** explained:

Ms Rice has been forced by America’s drastically compromised situation in Iraq into making changes from a position of weakness. “When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail,” said a former senior diplomat in the Clinton administration. “But, because of Iraq, these guys don’t have much of a hammer any more”. [25]

The weakening of US hegemony isn’t just a consequence of the ham-fisted arrogance of the Bush administration. It is an achievement of those who have opposed the global state of exception proclaimed by Bush after 9/11. Pride of place here must go to the resistance in Iraq itself, but the international anti-war movement can claim a share of credit.

Washington’s descent into the Iraqi quagmire has in turn created a space in which resistance can develop elsewhere. The most important case in point here is Latin America, especially in Venezuela and Bolivia where the interaction between mass movements and political leaders has produced governments that have begun, in however hesitant and inconsistent a way, to pursue a logic that breaks with neoliberalism.

None of these very positive features of the present situation alter or remove the difficulties that we have discussed above. What they do cast into question is any suggestion that the balance of forces is shifting decisively to the right or that the

cycle of struggles that began in the mid-1990s is drawing to a close. Even in Europe, where the movement is in greatest trouble, we are barely a year away from the massive revolt by French students and trade unionists that smashed the CPE law reducing the rights of young workers. The persistence of the neoliberal offensive will undoubtedly produce more social explosions, particularly if France's new right wing president, Nicolas Sarkozy, carries out his threat to drive through market "reforms".

The critical issue is that posed by Samir Amin when he asks: "Does the World Social Forum benefit popular struggles?" In other words, what is the relationship between the anti-capitalist movement as an organised force and mass resistance to neoliberalism and imperialism? The honest answer is that is pretty variable and is likely to remain so. The organisational implosion of the European movement does not make one especially optimistic about the ESF. If the next forum does indeed take place in Scandinavia, this will be in a region where anti-capitalist resistance has been at a comparatively low level (with the exception of the protests at the Gothenburg EU summit in June 2001). A Scandinavian ESF will probably be the most right wing yet, dominated by NGOs and the local branches of Attac.

The same need not be true of the WSF. Even in Nairobi there were, as we have already suggested, hints of the explosion of energy that can be generated by the convergence of different movements. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the dominant forces in the WSF process are pushing in the opposite direction, and promoting fragmentation rather than what Amin calls "convergence in diversity". It is the duty of the left within the anti-capitalist movement firmly to resist these tendencies. This resistance, however, needs to be accompanied by an alternative strategy that is informed by an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the movement to date.

This understanding has to involve an open break with the ideology of autonomous social movements. Too often the left has taken its stand within the framework of that ideology, whether for tactical reasons or from principled agreement. But a break is required by an honest appreciation of the interplay between political parties and social movements. The truth is that cooperation between the two actually strengthens both. However much retrospect is coloured by Bertinotti's subsequent right turn, the high points of the European movement at Genoa and Florence were informed by this cooperation, involving not merely Rifondazione but also smaller parties of the radical left such as the LCR and the Socialist Workers Party as well as more radical elements of Italy's centre-left Left Democrats.

The same is true at a global level. The peak so far reached by the WSF took place, not at any of the Porto Alegre Forums, but in Mumbai in January 2004, infused as it was by both a strong anti-imperialist consciousness and the movements of India's vast poor. But the two key organisations of the Indian left – the Communist Party (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India – alongside various Maoist organisations, played a critical role both in making the forum possible and in restraining themselves from trying to dominate the forum or competing too openly among themselves.

An honest reappraisal of the relationship between parties and movements would allow the social forums to play to their strengths. The two most successful forums – Florence and Mumbai – were ones where opposition to the “war on terror” was a dominant theme. Saying this does not mean returning to the tedious and sterile argument – either the war or the “social question”. Opposition to both neoliberalism and war are constitutive themes of the anti-capitalist movement. But recognition of both the principled significance and the mobilising power of anti-imperialism needs to be built into how the social forums operate. This was proved by the success of last year's “polycentric” WSF in Caracas, Venezuela. It was taken

for granted among the tens of thousands of mainly Latin American activists assembled there that the US poses a real and present threat to the gains being made by movements in Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador. President Hugo Chávez echoed many others when he spoke there of the importance of the movement against the Iraq war in weakening the US's ability to act in what it regards traditionally as its own backyard.

Yet the Caracas forum also showed up the limitations of the WSF process. It should have been possible, for example, to launch a very high profile, high powered campaign from the forum calling on all the movements round the world to pledge defence of the gains of the Chavista experience so far. Many present were suggesting it. But because of the autonomist principles so jealously guarded by the WSF leadership, no such centralised initiative was taken.

In breaking out of this impasse, it will be necessary to define precisely what the radical left is within the movement. This is no simple matter. The big Indian Communist parties, despite the very positive role they played in the Mumbai WSF, participate in neoliberal coalitions at the all-India and state levels: the Left Front government in West Bengal has violently clashed with workers and peasants in recent months. The sorry record of Rifondazione has already been discussed. A much more principled organisation, the LCR, has kept aloof from the anti-capitalist movement as an organisation, because of its acceptance of a version of the ideology of autonomous social movements (although individual LCR members such as Christophe Aguiton, Pierre Rousset and Sophie Zafari have played important roles in the movement at global and/or European levels).

Documents of the left within the movement tend to espouse versions of radical reformism. The Bamako Appeal's first plank is, "For a multipolar world founded on peace, LAW and negotiation". [26] Amin's pronouncements are sometimes redolent of nostalgia for the high tide of Third World nationalism

between the 1950s and 1970s: “The reconstruction of a ‘front of the countries and peoples of the South’ is one of the fundamental conditions for the emergence of ‘another world’ not based on imperialist domination”. [27] Another important figure on the left of the movement, Walden Bello of Focus on the Global South, shows a similar approach in his calls for “deglobalisation”. [28] Such formulations do not sufficiently address the reality that confronting imperialism as a system will require global social transformation based on the collective power and organisation of the oppressed and exploited in the North as well as the South.

None of this should prevent cooperation among different forces on the left seeking to give the anti-capitalist movement a more coherent and strategically focused direction. Such cooperation is essential. But it needs to be accompanied by open debate about the nature of the enemy that we are confronted with and of the alternatives that we should be seeking. [29] Striking the right balance between disagreement and cooperation once again requires a break with the ideology of autonomous social movements.

This ideology conceives social movements as a neutral space somehow beyond politics. But fighting neoliberalism and war is necessarily a highly political affair, and nowhere is free of the antagonisms of wider capitalist society. The development of the movements necessarily generates political disagreements that cannot be kept separate from party organisations. The emergence of new anti-capitalist political formations that are at least partly the product of movements of resistance – Portugal’s Left Bloc, the Left Party in Germany, Respect in Britain – shows the extent to which activists recognise the need for a political voice as part of the development of opposition to neoliberalism and war.

We believe that the concept of the united front, developed by the revolutionary Marxist tradition, provides a better guide to building democratic, dynamic movements than does the model that has prevailed so far. A united front involves the coming

together of different forces around a common but limited platform of action. Precisely because they are different, these forces will have disagreements about political programme; they may also differ over how to pursue the common actions that have brought them together. But so long as they come together round limited and relatively specific aims, such alliances can be politically inclusive and maximise the chances of practical campaigning agreement. Because they are focused round action, they can be a testing ground for different tactics and strategies. This is the way to break movements away from abstract position taking or sectarian point scoring, so providing a framework in which political debate and practical organising can fruitfully interplay.

Constructing such united fronts is not easy: it requires initiative and clear leadership on the one hand, and openness and humility on the other. But at a time when the anger against neoliberalism is growing everywhere and so many people are reassessing their political loyalties, it seems to us that the anti-capitalist left needs urgently to try such methods if it is to reach out and connect with its potential audience.

There is unlikely to be agreement between the different tendencies in the movement in the short or medium term over general political alternatives. But we can reach constructive agreement on the many issues – opposition to neoliberalism and war – that unite a large spectrum of forces. It is precisely this kind of unity in action that many people are looking for in the current situation. Through the experience of such campaigning, new political coalitions can emerge. Moreover, the left within the movement, whether revolutionary or reformist, should working together in order to fight to give the movement a more strategic and focused direction.

Many of the ideas and arguments of the anti-capitalist movement have gone mainstream in the seven long years since Seattle. Neoliberalism has been widely discredited. The world's "hyper-power" is in the process of a terrible humiliation in the

Middle East that will have major repercussions for its ability to intervene and shape geopolitics. In these circumstances the left has a responsibility to examine the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the anti-capitalist movement as it has functioned up to now, and not allow the movement to be trapped in an impasse.

Notes

- [1.](#) For background on the movement in its initial phase, see Harman, 2000; Charlton and Bircham, 2001; Callinicos, 2003; Mertes, 2003; and Tormey, 2004.
- [2.](#) Oloo, 2007, p. 1.
- [3.](#) Oloo, 2007, p. 3.
- [4.](#) Bello, 2007.
- [5.](#) Ciccaglione, 2007.
- [6.](#) Wintrebert, 2007, figures from pp. 69–71.
- [7.](#) For a wildly biased and inaccurate but interesting account of this process by one of the founders of Attac, see Cassen, 2003a.
- [8.](#) Cassen, 2003b.
- [9.](#) For a more extended discussion of the process of political differentiation, see Callinicos, 2004a; on the European Social Forum in London, see Callinicos, 2004b.
- [10.](#) For a brief summary of these differences, see Callinicos, 2004a, pp. 98–106.
- [11.](#) Bensaïd, 2007, pp. 139–140.
- [12.](#) See Nineham, 2006. Wintrebert, 2007, offers an interesting account of the role of such coalitions in the emergence of French *altermondialisme* – see chapter 1.
- [13.](#) See the damning analyses in Oliveira, 2003 and 2006.
- [14.](#) Kouvelakis, 2005, p. 10.
- [15.](#) George, 2006.
- [16.](#) Wintrebert, 2007, Part III.
- [17.](#) Bernocchi, 2006.

- [18.](#) Freeman, 1972.
- [19.](#) Wintrebert, 2007, p. 261.
- [20.](#) See, for example, Whitaker, 2003.
- [21.](#) Callinicos and Nineham, 2005.
- [22.](#) Amin *et al.*, 2006. See Sen and Kumar (*eds.*), 2007.
- [23.](#) Amin, 2007.
- [24.](#) BBC World Service, 2007.
- [25.](#) Luce, Barber, and Dinmore, 2007.
- [26.](#) Amin, *et al.*, 2006. For a critical take on such slogans, see Miéville, 2005.
- [27.](#) Amin, 2007.
- [28.](#) Bello, 2002.
- [29.](#) See, for example, Callinicos, 2003, and Callinicos, 2006.

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